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What is This?

Transgender Theory: Embodying Research and Practice

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Abstract

Transgender theory is an emerging theoretical orientation on the nature of gender and gender identity in understanding the lived experiences of transgender and transsexual individuals. It is distinct in emphasizing the importance of physical embodiment in gender and sexual identity. Transgender theory integrates this embodiment with the self and socially constructed aspects of identity through the lived experiences of those with intersecting identities. Thus, it provides a theoretical basis for reconciling feminist and queer theoretical scholarship with social work practice and advocacy, with regard not only to issues of working with transgenders but also to larger issues of group identity and social oppression. This article describes the emergence of transgender theory from feminist and queer theories that used social constructivist approaches to challenge essentialist ideas that maintained the oppression of certain gender and sexual identities. Transgender theory is also applied to specific issues of understanding, working with, and empowering transgender persons and building coalitions between them and other socially oppressed groups.

The experiences of transgender individuals (hereafter "transgenders"), those who do not conform to traditional gender identity binaries, raise compelling questions about the nature of socially defined identities. Does one's identity in a category, such as gender, require that this identity be fixed in a particular body? What if one's central experience of oppression is being forced to conform to a socially constructed identity category that one does not actually identify with? How do social workers empower and collaborate with individuals who have fluid identities?

Transgender theory is a newly emerging theoretical orientation that encompasses the unique experiences of transgenders. Although previous essentialist approaches viewed social identities as fixed within the person, feminist and queer theories locate social identities in the conflict between

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social- and self-determinants. These approaches are incomplete for social work practice. If someone's social identity is understood as being fixed or essential within the person, it can validate and justify sex, racial, class, and other differences as being "natural," which can ultimately reify the multiple systems of oppression. At the same time, questioning and destabilizing all social identities disintegrates the individual's sense of core self within a socially oppressed group, even though such an identity can be the basis for personal empowerment and empowerment to oppose social oppression. Transgender theory encompasses and transcends feminist and queer theory by explicitly incorporating ideas of the fluidly embodied, socially constructed, and self-constructed aspects of social identity, along with the dynamic interaction and integration of these aspects of identity within the narratives of lived experiences. Starting from feminist and queer theory approaches, this article discusses the evolution of transgender theory as an important next step to a more complete and inclusive understanding of gender and sexual identity. Suggestions are then provided for applying transgender theory to specific issues of understanding, working with, and empowering transgenders and building coalitions between transgender communities and other socially oppressed groups.

Transgender and Transsexual

Transgenderism can be defined as the breaking of gender roles and gender identity and/or going across the boundaries of gender to another gender (Green, 2004). Transgenders typically express gender identities outside traditional heteronormative definitions, but may have little or no intention of having sex-reassignment surgeries or hormone treatments (Bornstein, 1994). Transsexual individuals can be either pretransition/operative, transitioning/in the process of hormonal and surgical sex-reassignment, or posttransition/operative (Hird, 2002).

Transgenders differ widely in their degree of belief in the fluidity of gender identity. Some accept such fluidity only to the extent that one can switch between two otherwise separate, essentialist, and pure gender categories, whereas others believe that an embodied gender identity is still highly malleable. Lane (2009) noted the concern that transsexual voices may be silenced or ultimately erased under the umbrella of transgender. Concentrating on the artificiality of gender can de-emphasize the need for transsexuals to change their sexed bodies, which is central to a transsexual lived experience, thus excluding transsexual narratives in queer and transgender theories. Transsexualism is defined as innate and biological, not chosen, therefore deserving of both social and legal recognitions. Conversely, transgenderism is thought of as learned, freely chosen, and socially determined, therefore not deserving of legal recognition (Wallbank, 2004). The transgender experience thus challenges heteronormative assumptions of the nature of gender, sexuality, and identity in ways that cannot be fully addressed by feminist and queer theories.

Feminist Theory and Essentialist Conceptualizations of Gender

Feminist theory addresses the cultural–historical context and biological premises of gender as well as the issues of sexism and the intersectionality of multiple forms of oppression. As Hawkesworth (2006) noted, feminist scholars have defined gender in numerous contexts, from an attribute to a type of social organization and as an ideology to sex roles, power differentials, and analytic categories. Gender is key to how one identifies people, organizes relationships with others, and develops meaning through natural and social events (Harding, 1986). Hausman (2001) argued that gender is really an "epistemology" for knowing and understanding the operation of culture in defining identities, in which one's perceptions and experiences of the world are attributed to a socially constructed narrative that is based on one's belonging to one gender category or the other. As Stryker (1994, pp. 249–250) stated:

> Bodies are rendered meaningful only through some culturally and historically specific mode of grasping their physicality that transforms the flesh into a useful artifact. ... Gendering is the initial step in this transformation, inseparable from the process of forming an identity by means of which we're fitted to a system of exchange in a heterosexual economy.

Gender is traditionally assumed to be based on a binary, mandatory system that attributes social characteristics to sexed anatomy (Hausman, 2001). From birth, humans are categorized as male or female on the basis of their external genitalia. Consistent with essentialism, those who were born male are supposed to act masculine and be sexually attracted to women, whereas those who were born female are supposed to act feminine and be sexually attracted to men. Society uses multiple methods of positive and negative reinforcement, including legal, religious, and cultural practices, to enforce adherence to these gender roles (Connell, 2002). Garfinkel (1967) noted that this gendered binary socialization is viewed as being "natural" and thus not questioned. This conceptualization of gender is similar to gender being theorized in a way that denotes its uses as part of a "reproductive arena" (Connell, 2002), whereby the woman is the "egg producer" and the man is the "sperm producer" (Smith, 1992). Feminism challenged male social dominance that was based on the gender binary by questioning the supposed "naturalness" of the subordination of women in social relationships because of the purported physical superiority of the male body over the female's supposedly more fragile and vulnerable body.

As Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, and Lydenberg (1999) discussed, the issue of whether the gender binary itself should be destabilized ultimately polarized feminist theory. French feminists, such as Cixous (1986), Irigaray (1991), and Kristeva (1986), seemed to "establish the female body and maternity as foundational and symbolic sources of women's psychic and sexual difference" (Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, & Lydenberg, 1999, p. 4), that is, that an essentialist view of "femaleness" as being natural and different from "maleness" was necessary for understanding and empowering women. In contrast, poststructuralist critics, like Butler (1993), argued that the materiality of the body was "already gendered, already constructed" (p. xi), such that the supposed physical basis of the gender binary was a socially derived construction of reality.

The degree and manner to which gender should be deconstructed continues to be both an issue among feminist theorists and a source of tension between feminist and queer theorists (Jagose, 2009). Scott (1986), for example, applied the postmodern perspective of individualism to argue for the social construction of gender and, therefore, that essentialism and the taken for granted role that "the sexed body is given" needs to be questioned. She stated that "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and [that] gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (p. 1067).

According to Shields (2008), one's identity is not just about his or her own self-identification but is also about the intersecting larger social structures and the power differentials that are associated with belonging to a certain group or groups. Individuals may belong to multiple socially oppressed groups, experiencing not only the sexism addressed by feminism but also the racism, classism, homophobia, and so forth. These intersections generate both oppression and opportunity (Zinn & Dill, 1996) including opportunities for coalition building to oppose multiple oppressions. As Risman (2004, p. 442) noted, "one must always take into consideration multiple axes of oppression; to do otherwise presumes the whiteness of women, the maleness of people of color, and the heterosexuality of everyone."

A feminist theory that adheres to an essentialist, fixed binary conception of gender identity is inadequate in addressing intersectional issues and fails to account for how a supposedly autonomous self in such a system can be empowered to resist oppression (see also, critique of liberal-individualist models of Shotwell and Sangrey, 2009). Bettcher (2010) noted that Haraway (1991) questioned the universality of the experience of oppression among women and Anzaldúa (1987) proposed that it is

the consciousness of the plurality of selves, which are associated with multiple social identities that allows for resistance to oppression. For transgenders, at least two identities, those of gender and of sexuality, are always intersectional, although, as we discuss later, feminist and queer theorists have at times tried deliberately to keep these identities separate.

Queer Theory and Social Constructivism

Much of the philosophical and political understandings of nonheteronormative gender identity and sexuality are derived from queer theory. Queer theory developed from feminist and deconstructivist theories that posited that "normative" and "deviant" sexual behaviors and cognitions are social constructs. The social constructivist approach was a rebellion against the "essentialist" ideas that developed in Western societies beginning in the late 19th century. Such essentialist ideas came to link gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation tightly within a binary, biologically based, heteronormative gender schema (Kimmel, 1996; Norton, 1997). Queer theory was, in many ways, a challenge to feminist theory. Rubin (1993) asserted that if feminism was framed as a theory of gender oppression, in which sexuality was assumed to be tied to gender identity, then one should question whether such a theory of gender oppression could also offer a valid theory of sexual oppression.

"Queer" is an identity, a theory about nonheteronormative sexuality, and a theoretical orientation for how identity is to be understood. The term queer can refer to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick, 1998, p. 208). Queer is at odds with the heteronormative, dominant schema (Halperin, 1995) and rebels against, or "queers," these kinds of essentialist views by proposing that gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientations are social constructs and, therefore, open to questioning, subversion, and self-construction. Butler (1990) made the case that gender identity is a social construction as well as the result of repeated performances of the expected behaviors of one's sex that create the illusion of an identity inside that underlies the expression of these behaviors. In other words, there is no central self. The presentations of behaviors that are defined by social conventions create the illusion of self that is consistent with our culture's assumptions that gender underlies the psyche of all people. These "constructed performances" also act as originating desires or identities from which a person's presentation of self emanates.

This sense of self-identity can be a position of both empowerment and confinement. As Jagose (1996, p. 132) noted, "Queer is not outside the magnetic field of identity. Like some postmodern architecture, it turns identity inside out and displays its support, exoskeletally," for example, by exposing and exaggerating the socially assumed aspects of social identities. Although queer theory attempts to create the perspective of the queer outside the heteronormative schema, it has also been critiqued for its lack of ability to deconstruct the individual queer experience. Although the term queer offers the solidarity of a group identity, "it is [also] an identity without an essence" (Halperin, 1995, p. 62). Similar to feminist theory, queer theory established a collective identity but at the expense of an understanding of the individual lived experience (Sullivan, 2003). Queer theory's critical analysis and application of intersectionality are also problematic. If multiple oppressed social identities are merely the product of multiple social forces, all of which can be queered, there is no explanation of how individuals navigate these multiple identities, nor is there a basis for using these identities as a source of empowerment for opposing oppression. For example, transgenders' transgressing the gender binary does not by itself constitute an identity from which to oppose the social oppressions that result from that transgression.

Transgender Theory: Beyond Essentialism and Social Constructivism

Transgenderism presents special challenges to both feminist and queer theories. A feminist theoretical approach to transgenderism that retains an essentialist view of gender would clearly be problematic. As Heyes (2003) pointed out, such an essentialist view would make one's body a proxy for identity, with female-to-male (FTM) transgenders being betrayers of their oppressed identities, while male-to-female (MTF) transgenders, who had relinquished male privilege, still would not be considered "real" women. The social and psychological meaning of being able to modify one's body with regard to gender would also be problematized. Heyes stated that "many MTF transsexuals are developing their own forms of feminist consciousness and expressing their own forms of politics by both refusing certain medical interventions and asserting their right to transform medical requirements" (p. 1115).

In spite of queer theory's advances in understanding sexual identity and oppression and in providing a voice for political challenge, many transgenders express dissatisfaction with the purely social constructivist assumptions about gender identity that are inherent in queer theory. As Hausman (2001) argued, queer theory as applied to transgender individuals may still promote gender-role stereotyping by seeming to accept gender categories, even as it attempts to queer (destabilize) them. Although queer theory may accept feminine males and masculine females, as well as a plurality of gender identities, it nevertheless builds on the assumption of the male versus female gender categories.

Transgender theory as a critique of queer theory developed from Roen's (2001) ideas that transgenderism included more than just an "either/or" conceptualization that accepted the fluidity of gender identity but still retained the gender binary. Roen contended that transgenderism also includes a "both/neither" conceptualization of gender identity outside the male/female binary, whereby transgenderism is seen as transgressing the gender binary, not necessarily as physically transitioning from one gender category to the other. Monro (2000), in turn, argued for the need to understand the lived experiences of transgenders and the limitations on the fluidity of gender imposed by the body and biology. She pointed out that even the postmodernist model fails to account for the sense of self or the impact of social structures on the fluidity and plurality of gender expression.

According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 851),

> the common social scientific reading of bodies as objects of a process of social construction is now widely considered to be inadequate. Bodies are involved more actively, more intimately, and more intricately in social processes than theory has usually allowed. Bodies participate in social action by delineating courses of social conduct—the body is a participant in generating social practice.

An example of this view is Bornstein's (1994, p. 72) description of transgender "gender outlaws" whose "mere presence is often enough to make people sick," that is, whose physical being is in itself a political statement.

There was thus a need for a theory of gender identity that would incorporate both a fluid self-embodiment and a self-construction of identity that would dynamically interact with this embodiment in the context of social expectations and lived experiences. Tauchert (2002) agreed that an "essentialist" view of gender as being based on the body (e.g., femaleness as derived from the potential for pregnancy and childbirth) reinforces traditional stereotypes about gender and gender roles. Nevertheless, she argued that conceptualizing gender as being solely a social construct is also problematic in that it denies the sense of identity that comes from a body that continues to exist as a seeming self between the social performances of gendered behaviors. The social constructivist approach also undercuts any basis other than personal choice (self-construction) for feminine

identity to counter the political assumptions and consequent social dominance that are associated with masculinity. Tauschert viewed the social constructivist approach as an assertion of the mental over the physical that is consistent with the mind–body dualism that is the basis for Western thought, in which the mind is seen as being separate from and dominant over the physical body. In contrast, she proposed a "fuzzy gender" approach that recognizes the essential continuity between the body and the mind, in which everything consists of "shades of gray" in moving between more physical versus more mental aspects of gender. Such an approach still allows for the recognition of the variations in gender identity and gender-related behaviors and sexuality and acknowledgment of the range of experiences, from physical or essentialist to wholly socially constructed, that are associated with gender.

Hird's (2002) history of theories of transsexuality similarly moved from essentialist to social constructivist to even more progressive ideas about the nature of gender identity. Hird began with theories that were concerned with "authenticity," in which transsexualism was considered in the context of an assumed real, presumably biologically based and measurable, binary gender paradigm from which transsexuals were deviant. Feminist theory spurred the shift from an emphasis on authenticity to one based on "performativity," in which gender identity is seen as solely an expression of learned social behaviors and cognitions (see, e.g., the previous discussion of Butler's, 1990, ideas). Performativity theories are based on the idea of symbolic interactionism, which challenges ideas of authenticity by not assuming that personal identity is a stable, coherent, and morphologically based object. The extent to which transsexual individuals can "pass" as "real" men or women supports the assertion that sex and gender do not naturally adhere to particular bodies.

Hird (2002, p. 578) proposed that transgender theories lead to notions of "transgression," in which the nature of the transsexual "renders obsolete the modern relationship of sex and gender." Norton (1997, p. 144) stated that

> the m-t-f transgender who is attracted to men radically destabilizes the meaning of heterosexuality, in that hir [*sic*] desire constitutes a homo-heterosexuality that deprives the regulatory homo/hetero binary of its force. Amidst the convolutions of transgender sexuality, it is no longer clear who it is that is desirous of whom, and in what kind of role relation. Even more vertiginously, the pronominal function itself breaks down, since the transgender antecedent is multivalent: it is not clear what "s/he" means.

Here, one sees that, of necessity, transgenderism must address the intersectionality of gender and sexual identities.

Shotwell and Sangrey (2009) proposed a "relational" model of feminist theory that builds on earlier ideas by Brison (2002) to provide a better conceptualization of the complexity, experiences of oppression, and gender formation of transgenders. In this model, as in transgender theory, embodiment is seen as an essential component of the self. Shotwell and Sangrey also explicitly argued for the role of self-construction as a narrative process and that this autonomous aspect of self exists in relation to and in interactions with the social environment. Whether one regards their model an extension of feminist theory or a distinct transgender theory is dependent on whether one believes that feminist theory can accept an embodied but fluid basis for gender identity.

A further refinement of the model of Shotwell and Sangrey (2009) can be suggested, whereby an individual's identity within a social categorization is understood as a continually dynamic interaction among three sources. First, consistent with Shotwell and Sangrey and with transgender theory, there is an embodied aspect of the self that generates bodily experiences, some of them undoubtedly unconscious, that really are essential for informing one's identity. Second, also consistent with Shotwell and Sangrey, there is an explicitly self-constructed aspect of identity, one that derives meaning from the narrative of lived experiences. The ability to self-construct one's identity is also the basis from which queer theory's subversion of socially constructed and imposed identities can

occur. The deliberately exaggerated "performances" of expected gendered behaviors is an example of such self-constructed subversions.

It is necessary, however, to define explicitly the socially constructed aspect of identity as a third source. Consistent with Butler (1990), the social environment does essentialize social identity by enforcing individuals to conform to the expectations of identity categories, and the repeated performances of these individuals in conformity with these expectations also acts as an essentializing force. Note that this is a different kind of "essentializing" from what is derived from embodied experiences in that it is the society that enforces a seemingly objective identity.

Finally, in this formulation, the autonomous self exists only in relationship to and interactions with these embodied, self-constructed, and socially constructed aspects of identity. In turn, this autonomous self can be understood only in terms of the narrative of one's lived experiences that actively integrates these aspects of identity. These ideas are consistent with Alcoff's (2006, p. 93) idea that "a more plausible account of the self . . . would hold that neither public identity nor lived subjectivity are separable entities, fundamentally distinct, or entirely independent of the other."

This transgender theory idea of fluid, embodied, and socially and self-constructed social identity can inform an understanding of intersectional oppressed identities. This approach to intersectional oppressed identities would consider the different embodied experiences and different social oppressions that are associated with having multiple social identities as well as the narratives of lived experiences through which individuals understand and negotiate these identities. For example, Namaste (2009) criticized Anglo–American feminist theory for not considering the centrality of labor, prostitution, and social class to the bodies, identities, and lives of transsexual women. She noted that prostitution is often the only way for these women to be able to afford sex-reassignment surgery and that this identity, based on labor, is inevitably a part of these individuals' transgender identities. That social class as an identity has embodied, as well as socially constructed and imposed, aspects is consistent with Adair's (2002) idea that poverty is physically "written on the body," as manifested in subconscious cowering postures and health problems from years of impoverishment and manual labor. Similar conceptions of embodied versus socially constructed aspects of racial identity were proposed by Collins (2005).

Application of Transgender Theory to Social Work

McPhail (2004) viewed social work as being caught between the social constructivist impulses of theoretically oriented academic researchers, who may regard all identity categories as open to interpretation, and the essentialist impulses of practitioners and political activists/advocates, who regard fixed identity categories as sources of oppression and empowerment. Her suggested solution is for social workers to "compromise" by recognizing the tension between the essentialist, binary, oppression model of identity, and the social constructivist queer theory models. Burdge (2007), in turn, argued that social workers, deriving their theoretical bases for working with transgender individuals from queer theory and social constructivism, should "challenge the rigid gender binary, either by eliminating it or expanding it to include more gender possibilities" (p. 247). However, she did not acknowledge the problem of social constructivist approaches undermining the meaningfulness of identity.

There are key differences in applying transgender theory, as opposed to feminist and queer theories, to social work theory and practice. The recognition of the importance of the physical embodiment of intersecting identities and the understanding of how the narratives of lived experiences integrate the socially constructed, embodied, and self-constructed aspects of identity are essential. Transgender theory emphasizes the understanding of how "transgressing" narratives of lived experiences integrate and empower those with oppressed intersectional identities.

The following sections discuss how understanding the socially constructed aspect of identity informs a sensitivity to the oppressive aspects of gendered language as well as how transphobia and gender identity dysphoria are part of a social oppression system that forces transgenders to conform to the socially constructed gender binary. Through "transcendant stories," the dynamic relationships in transgenders' lived experiences of their embodied and self-constructed aspects of identity can act to empower transgenders to resist oppression. Finally, an intersectional theory of identity provides a framework for building coalitions across individuals with multiple, intersectional identities.

Communication in a Gendered World

Language is a subtle way in which the socially constructed aspects of gender identity can act as oppression. When working with transgender individuals, Lindsey (2005, p. 185) asked:

> How to describe, in accessible language, such complicated and personal issues as one's gender identity or the choice to medically transition or how a searing homophobic or transphobic remark can damage our psyches? How to define words like "transgender" or "transsexual" or "queer"-loaded words that some of us claim, others of us do not, and some do not even recognize or understand.

The idea that we are just men and women and the effortlessness of this binary view can lead to a reification of a simplistic binary view of gender (Looy & Bouma, 2005). Social workers can challenge this type of terminology and categorical way of thinking by embracing a more fluid view of gender and addressing individuals by the names they prefer (Burdge, 2007), avoiding automatically using words like "sir" or "madam," or any other gendered pronouns.

Social work educators should also note the constraints of contemporary social theories that still describe gender and sexual orientation in a categorical context, with social meanings of who is "masculine" and who is "feminine" and what these gendered bodies do and/or feel about one another. According to Valentine (2004), the concern is that gender-related categories are used as if they were valid and complete descriptions of the experience of gender, when such categories are not using all the means for understanding that experience. Social workers should avoid making assumptions about the motivations, behaviors, and attitudes of individuals that are based on social identity categories and should be more sensitive to the conditional nature of these categories (McPhail, 2004). For example, words like real or biological, when applied to gender, can evoke strong emotional reactions in transgenders by seeming to question the legitimacy of their identities (Mallon, 2009).

Transphobia and Gender Identity Disorder

A more fundamental way in which the social construction of gender and sexual identities can act as oppression is the bidirectional relationship between transphobia, the extreme prejudice and discrimination experienced by transgenders (Hill & Willoughby, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2008), and gender identity disorder (GID). Because the pathologizing of transgenderism as GID encourages prejudice against transgenders, social workers have advocated for the elimination of the GID diagnosis from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Ault & Brzuzy, 2009; Burdge, 2007). Doing so would remove the requirement that transgenders must be diagnosed with GID before they are allowed to have sex-reassignment surgery.

The depathologizing of transgenderism, however, does not remove the problem of transgender individuals having to deal with the pervasive and pernicious transphobia that exists in society. Social workers need to make clear to transgenders that their discomfort with their gender identity is not a pathology but an issue of having to conform to society's gender-binary norms. Social workers should not recommend sex-reassignment surgery just so clients can better cope with social pressures

regarding gender but instead should create a safe space for clients to create their own gender identities, regardless of whether the clients want the surgery.

Halberstam (1998, p. 148) noted that "many subjects, not only transsexual subjects, do not feel at home in their bodies" and that "there are a variety of gender-deviant bodies under the sign of non-normative masculinities and femininities, and the task at hand is not to decide which represents the place of most resistance but to begin the work of documenting their distinctive features." Social workers can document these distinctive features by creating spaces on standardized forms for capturing variations in gender and by recording and disseminating the narratives of transgender individuals. Doing so would then create new gender categories that would destabilize the existing binary system (Hausman, 2001).

Lived Experiences and Transcendent Stories

Beyond the use of the narratives of transgenders that educate others about their experiences, Ekins and King (2006, p. 181) proposed empowering "transcendent stories," whereby "self, body and gender redefining in the particular transcending story seeks to subvert and/or move beyond the binary divide." Selves, bodies, body parts, sexualities, and genders can take on new meanings within the redefined system of classification. The "transgressive approach" of transgenderism, noted by Hird (2002), calls for "resisting constraining classifications, redefining classifications, and planning different strategies of resistance within different sites of power/knowledge" (Ekins & King, 2006, p. 232). Burdge (2007) called for social workers to empower transgender individuals to resist having to conform to the gender binary, but transgender theory may provide a more effective basis for this empowerment than may queer theory.

Transgender theory suggests that the lived experiences of individuals, including their negotiations of multiple intersectional identities, may empower them without confining them to any particular identity category. Transgender theory advocates for practitioners to look for sources of empowerment in the dynamic interactions among embodied and constructed aspects of identity. For example, Somerville (2000) stated that intersectional identities can allow individuals to respond to the social forces that determine and objectify one's identities in multiple ways. In particular, she discussed Feinberg's (1993) semiautobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* about arriving at a "transgender" identity, voice, and subjectivity that transcend the socially defined gender category. It is the multiplicity of identities that allowed Feinberg to achieve this identity, that "the emergence of this transgendered voice and subjectivity is mediated through racial discourses ... through repeated invocations of Native American and African American culture and identity" (Somerville, 2000, p. 171).

Lucal (1999) provided another example of a transcendent story that was based on embodiment. After discussing the various ways in which her masculine physical appearance as an MTF caused those around her to have difficulty interacting with her, she nevertheless chose to "continue my non-participation in femininity" as "one of my contributions to the eventual dismantling of patriarchal gender constructs" (p. 793). Here, the remnants of male embodiment were transformed into a narrative that was not only a source of personal meaning but also a basis for political activism. Social workers can identify sources of empowerment in these intersectional identities of clients by encouraging clients to view a seemingly oppressed identity from the perspective of another identity. Eventually, this intersectional perspective may lead clients to understand their embodied ability to construct their own unique identities.

Coalition Building With Intersectional Identities

Social workers need to understand that, while the roots of oppression may be linked to fixed identities, this does not have to be the case for responses against that oppression; one can still

empower oneself against oppression by starting from a fluid identity. Transgender individuals can be empowered to create their own identities outside the socially constructed binary gender boxes. Beyond empowerment, transgender theory provides an alternative to feminist and queer theories in addressing the thorny issue of coalition building for social activism in an intersectional world.

Feminist theory's premise is centered on the ongoing struggle for gender equality. Several authors (e.g., Bettcher, 2010; Heyes, 2003), however, have noted that many feminists have regarded transgenders as either gender betrayers or pretenders, and Bettcher (2010) presented a history of the exclusion of transgenders from women's consciousness events. Transsexuals who choose to transition from one sex to another are seen as reiterating the sexist model by seeming to move "effortlessly" to the other box. In this, FTMs are considered traitors because they have gained male power without earning it and have turned their backs on women's oppression. MTFs are also traitors for trying to call themselves real women with embodied experiences, although they have not experienced oppression throughout their lives, as many women have. Such exclusions are problematic for both transgenders and women who are working to challenge gender and other social identity oppressions. For transgenders, such exclusion robs them of affiliations with nontransgender women, who would seem to be natural allies in opposing the sexism that is commonly experienced by both groups. For nontransgender women, transgenders provide a unique perspective on the nature of gender oppression and how to resist it. By creating the obstacle that MTFs cannot be a part of women's coalitions, nontransgender woman are ultimately solidifying the gender binary that oppresses women in the context of power differentials with men. In addressing these issues, the transgender theory approach to intersectional identities provides a general framework for coalition building across multiple oppressed social identities. Clearly, building coalitions between transgenders and nontransgender feminist women should be seen as not only possible but highly desirable.

The feminist relational model of Shotwell and Sangrey (2009) makes the point that any outside imposition of a social identity on an individual is a form of oppression, whereas the self-assertion of a social identity forces those outside that identity to consider what it means to have or not have that identity. Thus, feminist nontransgender women's exclusion of MTFs as not being "real" women and their view of FTMs as "traitors" is a form of oppression, whereas the self-assertion of a transgender identity forces those who are not transgenders to have to understand the nature of this identity. The implication of these ideas is that membership in coalitions for resisting oppression should be based on the experience of oppression—how social forces coerce individuals into fitting into social identity boxes with prescribed expectations for social appearance and functioning—not on the degree of self-identification that an individual has with the oppressed group. Such an approach recognizes and draws strength from the commonalities of individuals with multiple, intersectional oppressed social identities.

Conclusion

Transgender theory encourages social workers to think and practice outside a number of boxes. An awareness of how language and the pathologizing of socially constructed differences reify arbitrary categories removes the onus on those who do not fit these social category boxes. Transgender theory's emphasis on embodiment and lived experiences suggests that empowerment can come from reading others' and creating one's own transcendent narratives outside these boxes; thus, empowerment is derived from the mind and body dynamically working together to transcend social constructs of gender or any other social category.

Transgender theory provides a comprehensive and integrated framework for understanding and empowering individuals with multiple, intersectional oppressed identities. There are numerous possible future applications of transgender theory in studying the nature of oppressed social identities and developing appropriate interventions for personal and political empowerment. Future research

should address the applicability of transgender theory to understanding how coalitions can be formed between transgenders and nontransgender women. Second, the implications of transgender theory for conducting intersectional research (Bowleg, 2008; Namaste, 2009) should be explored. Finally, transgender theory may provide feminism with a means of reconciling long-standing debates about how the nature of gender informs resistance to gender oppression.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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